Rose Lucas (1994) believes that the focus on food and cooking in *Like Water For Chocolate* suggests the possibilities of a paradox: ‘that is, it indicates the conventional passage of a subjectivity through a social and epistemological system and it also suggests the potential for that same process to signify transgression, permeability, a breaking of the rules’ (cited in Hannaford & Mules 2005). This statement applies to Laura Esquivel’s, *Like Water For Chocolate (Como agua para Chocolate)* first published in 1989 and translated into English in 1993. Esquivel’s novel is set out like a traditional Mexican woman’s diary during the 1850s. The novel is filled with recipes and tips on household chores and tells the story of Tita and her family. Tita, the youngest of Mama Elena’s three daughters is bound by a family tradition that insists she must never marry but instead care for her mother until she dies. However, Tita falls in love with Pedro and while he asks for her hand in marriage, Mama Elena refuses and offers Pedro her eldest daughter Rosaura. Pedro marries Rosaura to be close to Tita, and while Tita feels trapped in a tradition, she uses her skills as a cook to subvert the conventional role she is bound by. Through cooking Tita rebelliously ignores Mama Elena and shows her love for Pedro. This paper will discuss the conventional passage of women in Mexico around the late 1800s and early 1900s and will explain how Tita and other characters in the novel use the social and epistemological system to break the rules imposed by society and Mama Elena.

Before we can understand how the focus on food is used to signify transgression, permeability and a breaking of the rules, we must first understand the social and epistemological system that creates those rules. *Like Water For Chocolate* is set in Mexico at the time of the Mexican Revolution around 1910 (White 1999). Women’s role in society was generally as a mother and wife, keeping house while also being objects for men to desire (White 1999; Farias 1996). White (1999) explains two aspects of Hispanic society: machismo and mestizaje. While machismo signifies the domineering, patriarchal men who control women and their desires, mestizaje is, “…the development of tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity by the transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries…” (Picart 1995 cited in White 1999). Thus, while Mexican society represses women through patriarchal tradition, women can find liberation through the use of old tradition and new thoughts (White 1999). When Tita falls in love with Pedro but cannot fulfil her desire, she uses an old tradition, cooking, and a new conceptualisation, getting what she desires (marriage), to break free of society and moral convention. In this way, Tita is able to express her passion for Pedro and undermine Mama Elena’s strict rules.

Nacha the original cook at the ranch, provides a great example of the typical female figure in Mexican society. Through Nacha, Tita learns everything she knows about cooking and life, and in this way women’s history is passed down from one generation to another:

‘Nacha, who knew everything about cooking – and much more that doesn’t enter the picture until later- offered to take charge of feeding Tita…From that day on, Tita’s domain was the kitchen’ (Esquivel 1993, p. 10).

The character of Nacha expresses the fact that the kitchen is the woman’s space. In fact, Nacha openly expresses her dislike for Rosaura because of her lack of culinary skills and appreciation for food:

‘Rosaura and Nacha had never been close. Nacha was annoyed by Rosaura’s picky eating…That’s how Nacha’s dislike of Rosaura began...’ (Esquivel 1993, p.31).

Nacha clearly believes the woman’s place should be in the kitchen as was the hegemonic thought in the 19th century (Farias 1996). Women were expected to create large, sumptuous meals, three or four times a day, for the men and children (Farias 1996). de Valdes (1995) explains that women’s activities consisted of cooking, sewing, storytelling, gossip, and advice. Esquivel intertwines these elements into her novel to give the reader a sense of the conventions placed upon women and how the characters in the novel subvert these restrictions.

Throughout the novel, Tita becomes more and more adverse to Mama Elena's rules and bolder in the way in which she expresses her dissatisfaction. When Pedro marries Rosaura and Mama Elena catches Pedro embracing Tita at the wedding, she threatens her to stay away from Pedro. While Tita obeys and tries to keep her distance, she finds other means of being close to Pedro. Tita is a good cook as she has grown up in the kitchen, and is expected to prepare meals for those in the house. However, instead of her cooking being a chore, Tita uses her food to break Mama Elena's rules and get close to Pedro. This is where the aspect of permeability can be seen through the use of food. Tita’s recipe for Quail in Rose Petal Sauce is one of the best examples of this phenomenon. When Pedro presents Tita with a bunch of roses to celebrate her first year as ranch cook, Mama Elena immediately tells her she must throw them away. However, ‘Tita cannot help but express her true emotions through food’, and so she uses the rose petals in a recipe (Mujica 1993). Tita couldn’t resist the temptation to transgress the rigid rules her mother imposed on her in the kitchen and in life and the effect this recipe has is explosive (Jaffe 1993). Everyone at the table believes the meal is exquisite, except for Rosaura who feels sick and perhaps this is because the dish expresses Tita’s passion.
for Pedro (Fitzsimmons 2001). The dish has the greatest effect on Gertrudis who begins to ‘feel an intense heat pulsing through her limbs’ (Esquivel 1993, p. 49). At this point the novel explains what is occurring:

‘It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails, in the wine, in every one of the meal’s aroma. That was the way she [Tita] entered Pedro’s body, hot, voluptuous, totally sensuous.’ (Esquivel 1993, p.49).

Here we can see that Tita has transferred her passion for Pedro into her food, there has been a permeating. Tita survives her mother’s harsh rule by transferring her love, joy, sadness, and anger into her cooking. Pedro offers no resistance to Tita’s expression of passion:

‘He [Pedro] let Tita penetrate to the farthest corners of his being and all the while they couldn’t take their eyes off each other’ (Esquivel 1993, p. 49)

By means of the quail in rose petal sauce Pedro and Tita consummate their love and breaks the rules imposed upon them by Mama Elena and society.

Through Tita’s recipe for quail in rose petal sauce, Gertrudis also find herself transgressing and breaking the rules. Unlike Tita, ‘Gertrudis does not challenge her mother but instead responds to her emotions and passions in a direct manner unbecoming a lady’ (de Valdes 1995, p. 81). The quail in rose petal sauce acts like an aphrodisiac on Gertrudis and she finds her body burning with desire:

‘Gertrudis was really stricken; her whole body was dripping with sweat. Her sweat was pink, and it smelled like roses, a lovely strong smell.’ (Esquivel 1993, p. 50)

While Gertrudis tries to extinguish the blaze inside of her with a shower, she ends up setting the shower on fire and running naked through the field. This magical style of story telling is prevalent throughout the book and expresses the breaking of rules in a spectacular fashion.

Esquivel uses magical realism as another way for the characters to escape from their natural and cultural boundaries. Magical realism combines both natural and supernatural categories of reality and the intertwining of these ‘...represents an insurgent force against hegemonic constructions of culture, identity, and history’ (Walter 1999, p. 64). This type of story telling is seen at the very beginning of the novel as we are told of Tita’s entrance into the world on ‘...a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor’ (Esquivel 1993, p. 10). Another great example of the use of magical realism is found after Gertrudis has finished eating the quail in rose petal sauce, which affects her so greatly that a ‘pink cloud’ floats all the way to the battle fields where Juan a revolutionary is fighting, and causes him to gallop away toward the ranch (Esquivel 1993, p. 51). By using magical realism, the characters in the narrative are able to break free of natural constraints and explore a more fantastic world, with greater possibilities.

Ultimately, Gertrudis is able to escape from the ranch through the use of magical realism in the narrative. Gertrudis’ scent of rose petals is smelt by Juan, a revolutionary, who gallops from battle to find its source. Upon seeing Gertrudis, he pulls her onto his horse and they make love as they ride off together. This is not the conventional way in which a woman was to act, she was unmarried, and had not been given permission to leave home. de Valdes (1995) explains that this ‘physical directness leads her to adopt an androgynous lifestyle.’(p. 81). This lifestyle includes her leaving home and Mama Elena’s authority, escaping from a brothel, and becoming a revolutionary general (de Valdes 1995). All of the roles that Gertrudis takes on are neither socially acceptable nor conventional. In this way Gertrudis is the ‘best physical manifestation of mestizaje...’ (White 1999, p.85). Through Esquivel’s focus on food and cooking, and through Tita’s amazing ability to create exquisite meals, Gertrudis is aroused and the tradition of cooking and eating in Mexican culture is used to imbue Gertrudis with new thoughts and desires.

When Gertrudis returns to the ranch as a general in the revolutionary army, she intertwines tradition, woman’s role in society with the achievement of her own goals (a new tradition) (White 1999). Gertrudis becomes so far removed from the traditional role of a woman in Mexican culture that she is unable to read or cook a recipe for fritters. Instead, she asks Trevino to help her and he must cook the fritters, this shows the complete reversal of roles that has taken place as a result of the focus on food and cooking. The only daughter who remains faithful to the prescribed model of women is Rosaura. She never questions Mama Elena’s authority but follow closely to her dictates. For example when Mama Elena offers Rosaura’s hand in marriage to Pedro she does not object even though she does not love him and she knows Pedro loves Tita:

‘Rosaura wasn’t sure, but she suspected that Pedro’s love for Tita was never ending’, (Esquivel 1993, p. 31)

After Rosaura is married, we find that she becomes an ‘insignificant imitation of her mother’ (de Valdes 1995, p. 81). While Rosaura does not have the skills of Mama Elena, there is a distinct parallel between the two women. Neither Mama Elena nor Rosaura have a real love for
food or cooking; in fact, at the beginning of the novel we discover Rosaura is a picky eater. Both are seen as Tita's enemies as their goal is to deny her love for Pedro. Esquivel uses food in her novel to show how it both suppresses and liberates the woman's desire. As neither Mama Elena nor Rosaura try to break free of the conventions of society they are not seen as appreciating or loving the food they eat. They are symbolically unattached to their feminine side because they cannot connect with the women's traditional role. Thus, Mama Elena takes on the patriarchal role in the family; she is the suppressor of desire and a different way of life. Likewise, Rosaura dislikes cooking and is a very picky eater and this makes her unattractive (White 1999). These two women provide us with the standard, which women must break through to achieve their own goals. While we find out later that Mama Elena had also transgressed by having an affair with an African American man (the product of which is Gertrudis) she suppresses this desire and conforms to the societal system.

Not only do the characters in the book give us an idea of the stifling restriction placed on women, but the style in which the book is written is also a comment on these conventions (de Valdes 1995). Ibsen asserts that, 'Underlying the appearance of conventionalism may be detected as playful parodic appropriation...' (1995, p.133).

The genre that is being parodied in Like Water For Chocolate is the ‘calendars for young ladies’ published in the 1850s (Babette’s feast, Gabriel Axel 1987 cited de Valdes 1995). These documents were created to instruct women how they were to act, but during the 1880s these monthly instalments became intertwined with love stories (de Valdes 1995). Men could not decode many of the stories because of the many references to home and kitchen of which they had no knowledge (de Valdes 1995). Esquivel uses this structure for her novel, with each chapter written in monthly instalments, which advertise what is coming up the next month. This very structure, with its focus on food and conventionality, also expresses a breaking of the rules, a new way of thinking for the woman. Even the front cover of the novel (Black Swan edition 1993) suggests a paradox, while the image of a man and woman suggests romance, passion and love the subtext reads: ‘A Novel in Monthly Instalments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies’ (Esquivel 1993, front cover). There is a duality to the novel, on one hand we see the conventional passage restricting women and on the other hand liberating them.

The language used in Like Water For Chocolate is said to have moved away from the traditional masculine discourse (Jaffe 1993, de Valdes 1995; Ibsen 1995). Through the use of traditional Mexican recipes and home remedies, Esquivel has feminized the traditional male text through irrationality and sensitivity usually associated with women (Ibsen 1995). The constant return to the recipes throughout the novel and their hidden meanings could prove difficult to read for Mexican men who had never set foot in the kitchen except to eat. Esquivel has used conventional Mexican women’s language of recipes and a focus on food and cooking to express new thoughts and ideas throughout the narrative. An example of this type of language can be seen in the use of a simile:

‘Tita knew through her own flesh how fire transforms the elements, how a lump of cornflour is changed into a tortilla, how a soul that hasn’t been warmed by the fire of love is lifeless, like useless ball of cornflour’. (Esquivel 1993, p. 63).

This imagery may be hard to understand if you do not have an understanding of cooking and the way in which cornflour is transformed into a tortilla.

Esquivel has cleverly used the focus on food in her novel as a paradox. The passage of Tita and her family through the ‘social and epistemological system also suggest the potential for that same process to signify transgression, permeability, a breaking of the rules’ (Lucas 1994 cited in Hannaford & Mules 2005). Through cooking, Tita is able to escape the rules of society imposed by Mama Elena and finds that it is a medium through which she can permeate Pedro’s body. Gertrudis is also touched by Tita’s breaking of the rules through her quail in rose petal sauce and finds herself in an unconventional role as a general in the revolutionary army. Through Mama Elena and Rosaura we are given an example of how women are expected to act, denying their desires and goals. Not only through the use of characterisation, but also through the use of structure and style of the narrative, Esquivel expresses the dual role of food to at one time restrict and at the same time liberate.

REFERENCE LIST


Fitzsimmons, J 2001, ‘Laura Esquivel’s Like water for chocolate’, NAFF Online, no. 1.1, Central Queensland University.

Hannaford, K & Mules, W 2005, NAFF course profile, Autumn Term, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton.


